

Commentary

Commentary From Coeur d'Alene: One Baby—Or Two?

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No one will deny that Jimmy Carter possesses a keen social consciousness. As President he charged a consortium of government agencies with the responsibility of making a prognosis of what our nation and our world would be like in the year 2000.

This effort resulted in the production of three heavy volumes, titled *The Global 2000 Report*.¹ Within these tomes lie dire predictions of a burgeoning world population, a depletion of natural resources and an ever-increasing price we will pay for the privilege of living on this planet.

Nowhere in these weighty volumes are we given a quick and easy solution for these cosmic problems. Conservation, of course. Population control, yes. That goes without saying.

It is unlikely that the global report of Jimmy Carter's will do much to change the course of events, at least not in the United States of America. Affluent America hesitates to change its ways of living. We enjoy the luxuries of life. We cherish our individualism and we will challenge the right of anyone to change our life-style, or to limit the size of our families. We have blind faith in the belief that tomorrow will bring us more bounteous chunks of gracious living, ours to enjoy into eternity.

Even though we are reluctant to accept the pessimistic forecast of the demographers, we should at least be willing to consider the probabilities.

Let us assume, as one probability, that in the year 2000 our fields have become less fertile, our streams are flowing at a low level and the cost of raising a family is soaring to an all-time high. What would be the logical course to follow? Obviously, we would opt for population control through the limitation of family size.

How, then, would that be accomplished? Will this be achieved through a voluntary effort of the American people or must there be government control? A look at how the "backward" nations of our world are enforcing population control might be instructive.

The People's Republic of China has just announced the results of its census—accomplished, incidentally,

with the aid of American computer technology. There are now 1.38 billion mouths to be fed in this land of low productivity. The Chinese leaders know that even if they succeed in holding to a 1 percent population increase, there will still be 1 million Chinese babies born every month.

Their solution is direct, aimed at the Chinese workers' already very slim pocketbooks. When a couple marries they are visited by a government representative. They are told, "The good of the great nation of China lies in the careful limitation of family size." Then the rules are spelled out. During the first pregnancy all care will be free, and the mother will be given generous time off from work with full pay. If a second pregnancy occurs, abortion is urged. Should the couple choose to go through with this pregnancy, the reimbursement for maternity care is cut to the minimum, and there is no paid-for postpartum vacation. If, by chance, the couple is so thoughtless as to allow a third pregnancy to occur, the full weight of family and community pressures is brought to bear. There must be an abortion with a permanent sterilization to follow.

This approach can be successful in a communist country where the government controls the pursestrings and writes the paychecks.

In the Philippines, on the other hand, the efforts have been directed toward a positive program of conception control. The implementation of this program initiated by President Marcos rests in the hands of a nonphysician, paraprofessional person who, in his assigned district, carefully oversees conception control. This person, who makes his rounds on burro or motorbike, is given the impressive name of Barangay Supply Point Officer (BSPO).

The BSPO works as a government agent, maintaining strict discipline, while dispensing advice and contraceptives. Such careful surveillance may include a visit to homes, where the BSPO does not hesitate to investigate the most intimate details of family life: "Is Serena taking her birth control pills regularly? Does Jose understand the proper use of the condom, or is he perhaps ready for permanent sterilization?" This one-on-

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one paternalistic population control program has effectively lowered the birth rate in the Philippines.

Thailand is another poverty stricken, overpopulated country whose national leaders have recognized the need for limitation of family size. In the years past the average number of infants born to a Thai mother was six. A vigorous family planning program has, in the past decade, reduced this number to three. A further reduction in maternal fertility to two or less is the goal of family planners.²

This exemplary success has been accomplished largely through education. The planners recognize that fertility and educational levels are inversely related. As a result of the educational programs the Mother Hubbard level of reproductive information has been replaced by basic knowledge of how and why pregnancy occurs and what can be done about prevention.

To attain these improved educational levels the government launched a three-pronged program:

1. *Education of school children.* Because the average duration of schooling in Thailand is six years, family-life education had to be introduced promptly, presenting a more specific type of information American educators still shy away from.

2. *Family planning.* In each village or district (tambon) there are family planning clinics, most of them supervised by nonphysicians. These clinics are an integral part of the national health service system and supply not only sex education and counseling, but birth control pills and devices.

3. *Postabortal and postpartum conception control.* Abortions (most commonly induced by massage!) are free at the national health clinics. Elective terminations and term deliveries are usually performed by nonphysicians—midwives and “barefoot doctors.” This is considered the opportune time to give the parturients strong directives, either in the form of contraception or permanent sterilization.³

Such data from “backward” countries are interesting, but most of us living in this land of plenty fail to see

how it has any bearing on our situation here in the USA, either now or in the year 2000. We are satisfied with the status quo.

It may just be that in our apathy we are blind to the increasingly important role being played by non-physicians in the area of population control in our own country, or that here in our own hometowns governmental and quasi-governmental agencies are concerning themselves with fertility control.

Our public health service provides pregnancy tests and the care of pregnant teenage girls. The “free” women’s clinics hand out birth-control pills and condoms, and make abortion referrals. Psychologists and social workers take part in family planning for the members of their “caseloads.” And they do it well.

Ms Lee Minto, Executive Director of Planned Parenthood, Seattle/King County, reports that during 1980 in the state of Washington 30,000 abortions were carried out, and of those almost a third were done on unmarried teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19.⁴ Planned Parenthood is convinced that counseling of these women can in some degree prevent the unhappiness of these unwanted pregnancies.

Population control, fertility control, is with us even though we may not recognize it as such. Our younger generation is being conditioned to accept the concept of family planning under the watchful eye of government agencies. These population control programs are, of necessity, carried out by nonphysicians. These persons are not BSPO’s, they do not ride burros or motorbikes. But it is at least conceivable that by the year 2000, when the *Global Report*’s predictions would come true, we, too, will see further invasion of our privacy, further intrusion into our family lives.

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